

SELF AND COLLECTIVE CARE

Well-being is not a
burden or a luxury,
it is an **individual
and collective need.**

RESIST
BY FLOURISHING

Jessica Horn

THE PERSONAL
IS
POLITICAL

As activists and movement builders, but mostly, as women,
**caring for our sisters and ourselves needs to be part of our daily
actions, our daily political actions.**

MAKING THE CASE FOR SELF AND COLLECTIVE CARE

"I AM MY SISTERS KEEPER"

We, as women activists working to dismantle patriarchal structures and stop violence against women and girls (VAWG), are steeped in work that requires an incredible amount of our strength, energy and time. We are frequently exposed to violence and injustice and carry individual and collective trauma; and, our actions, voices and movements are policed. **We feel the anger, anguish, stress, frustration, pain and desperation of our contexts**, and over time this exposure can take a toll on us and the groups we are involved in when we disregard our own personal well-being and that of others.

This zine explores the **role of self and collective care in our work as necessary for our social movements**. Although caring for ourselves and others can often feel like an extra burden; an extra cost or a luxury, **we aim to encourage well-being as a collective strategy for preserving the movement itself, where the well-being of one becomes the responsibility of all.**

In this sense, caring for ourselves and each other means:

1 Recognizing our needs - For our survival and health we need spaces and time for rest and renewal. Healthy food sustains us. Finding pleasure and joy in our lives connects us with purpose and happiness – whether it is dancing with friends or cooking a delicious meal, making your home beautiful or creating something with your hands, it can release tension and renew meaning in the work we do.

2 Recognizing our limits - Our bodies are not machines; we have biological, emotional and physical rhythms that we have to respect. It is important to find small and daily ways to discharge the weight of facing VAWG because we often carry our own trauma and that of others. **Daily acts of care include treating ourselves and others with love, care and compassion**; speaking with colleagues or family; finding spaces of silence and relaxation.

3 Finding our community – building support networks before breakdowns and burnout occur means knowing with whom we can connect in what spaces and via what means of communication. Having people with whom we can cry and laugh, discuss fears and dreams keeps us resilient.

In this sense, we believe self and collective care is a

DAILY POLITICAL ACT

because it is:

* **Transgressive**: in a world where women are treated violently, **it is a way of challenging patriarchy** from the individual level and from the collective level.

* **Liberating**: it is a way of expressing our self-worth – shaking off the roles we are given as women by expressing that we have hopes, dreams, stories, social lives, love, **we are reaffirming to ourselves and the world that we are deserving of these things.**

* **Empowering**: self-care is more than consuming vanity products designed to help us fulfill our roles as objectified and reproductive bodies. **We have the power to define what self and collective care is for us**, independent of our health care system, public services or resources.



HOW ARE WE PROMOTING SELF AND COLLECTIVE CARE IN OUR MOVEMENTS?

"LET IT OUT SO YOU CAN CONTINUE"

* **First, by recognizing that self-care is not selfish and that it is important to create space for it** – encouraging individual and organizational cultures and practices.

* **By including art and creative methodologies as part of our movements.** From a neuroscience perspective it has been proven that **creative methodologies 'open the body and the brain'** and this is a critical way to process deep/repressed feelings and wounds.

* **By asking our donors to finance care** – we need these to be permitted costs and to be able to allocate **funds for psychosocial support and other creative and healing practices:** art, dance, care-spaces – it is not about the results, it is about the process.

* **By recognizing we play different roles in our movements** - self-care is risky in repressive contexts and women defenders on the frontlines do not have the ability to stop or step out of their struggles; therefore it is so important that we are collectively building in care to our movements.

* **By understanding and reflecting on the idea that change is non-linear, it is cyclical.** When change is projected as linear, it forces us to look at our teams in terms of utility and results. And when crisis happens, we can compound the harm we or certain members of our team are experiencing by continuing to think of ourselves and our sisters in terms of their utility for achieving results.

WHAT GOOD PRACTICES CAN WE LEARN FROM OUR SISTERS?

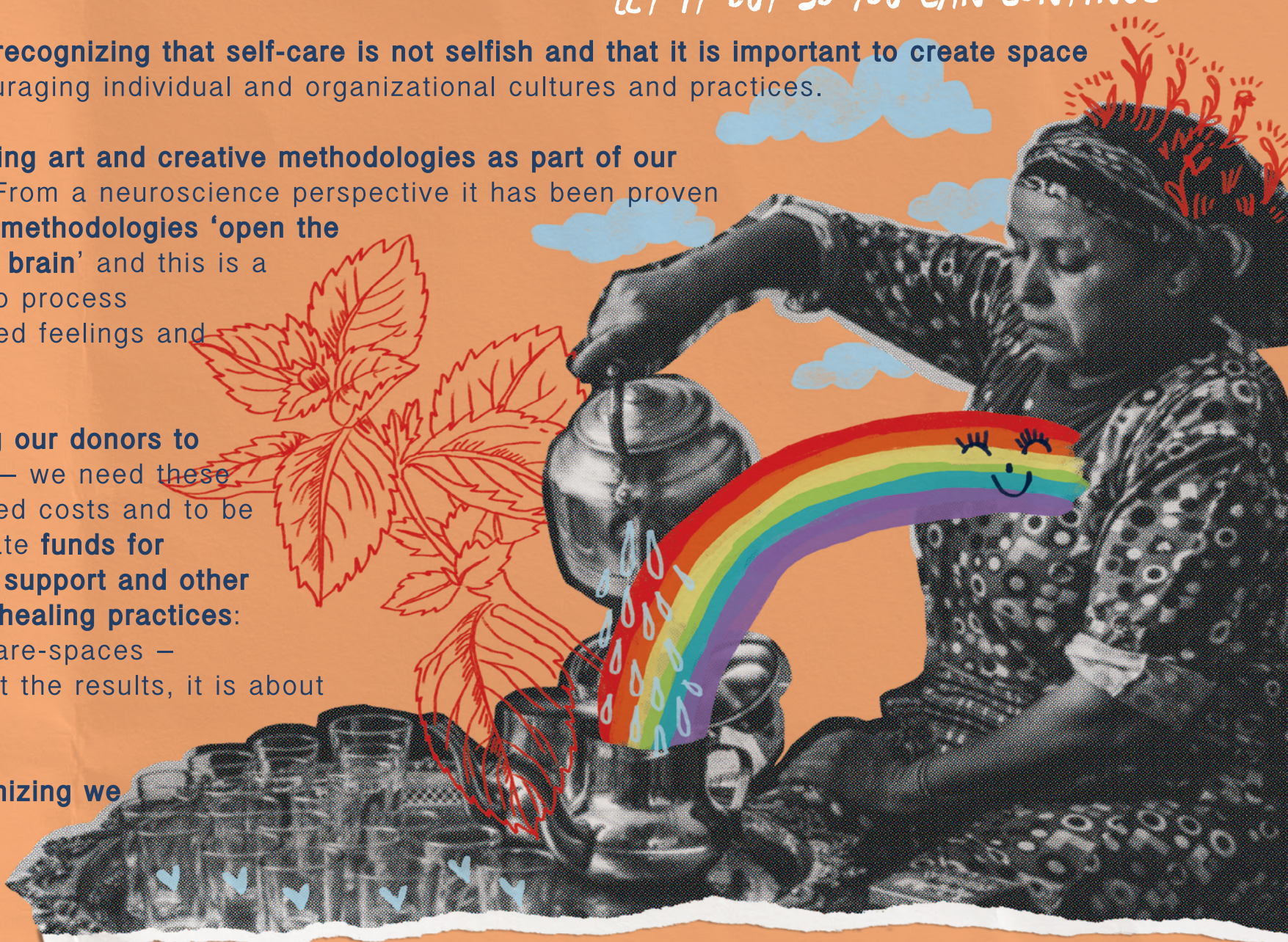
* Activists and movement builders across our regions mention how **activities like crotchet, clay, sewing, yoga, meditation, art, exercise and closeness with friends are part of their individual and collective routines.** There is evidence that these activities do actually heal parts of the brain.

* **We let it out and we connect** - The Uganda Feminist Forum includes spaces to create sisterhood. **It is through the friendship and movement that many women and girls have been able to unleash some 'madness'** and found a space where sisters can all talk freely about their experiences and trauma.

* **We are working to include self-care in our methodologies and not keep it as a separate issue.** In the 2016 AWID Forum we prioritized safe "home" spaces in both the Black Feminist Forum and throughout the agenda to promote and share good practices.

* **We are defining how we heal** - in the Move to End Violence, black activists **defined small acts such as making signs for protests as acts of healing and care**, as they helped women reconnect to their individual power and agency.

* **We are building solidarity** - Many members of the GBV Prevention Network are participating in a Sister-to-Sister program that creates connection and cross-national relationships with other feminists.



WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT WE ARE PASSING OUR LIMITS?

This issue is dedicated to self and collective care because burn out is still considered taboo and hushed, but it is real and happening to us all over the world. Some indicators that we may be passing our limits include:

- * **When we are not sleeping well, eating well, or prioritizing our basic daily needs** - healthy eating, sleep, hydration.
- * **When we feel unsafe, alone or uncomfortable in our safe spaces** - nothing makes us feel comfortable or relieved.
- * **When we experience changes in our abilities** - the mental forms of processing information about our work or even everyday things.
- * **When we lose the connection to our work and our movements** - we feel lethargic (without energy) - the issues that once raised passion in us to move and push for change, saturate us. We feel numb to the issues and impatient with survivors.
- * **When we are projecting our emotions onto others** - creating emotionally charged environments at work and at home.

All of these (and more) can be signs of a lack of self-care and are indicators that we need to make space to care for ourselves.

TOOLS FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION



* **Ask yourself:** What is the best way for me to release tension and stress? **Which practices can I do today on my own that nourishes my body, mind and soul?** What gives me pleasure and joy? (exercise, dance, meditation or prayer, reading, sleeping, alone time, group support, art therapy, hiking, spending time with friends, etc).

* **As organizations, improve collective care by enhancing spaces for sharing doubts, shame, fears, happiness, openly.** Pay special attention to the division of labour so that each person can talk about their workload and ask for help if necessary. **As a community, we are all responsible for the well-being of each other;** it is in the moments of caring and sharing that we build stronger relations that will certainly enhance the movement.

* **Start now. Practice self and collective care so that it becomes a habit in your daily life.** It is not necessary to wait until we are burned out to pay attention to our needs and emotions.

* **Asking our team members:** are our work spaces full of pride? Of joy? Do they reflect the soul of our work?

* **Are we discussing our roles and what it means to be useful for the movement?** Do we consider our differences, needs, and limits?

To go deeper into self and collective care, check out the resources in the online toolbox at:
www.preventgbvafrica.org/understanding-vaw/zines

This magazines series emerged from a gathering of feminist activists working to prevent VAWG in the Global South co-hosted by Raising Voices and JASS.